Article by the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch:"The Future of Bosnia lies with its People"

How long will the international community continue to spend its time and effort in Bosnia-Herzegovina ? That question naturally concerns me as the new "high representative" of the international community here. But it also ought to be of some interest to the people who pay my salary – the taxpayers of the world.

Though it should not be the only yardstick by which to judge the operation, the financial burden has been considerable. Some $5.1 billion has been pledged since the Dayton peace agreement was signed in 1995, and that's for reconstruction costs alone. Add in the huge cost of maintaining a military presence here – the 30,000-strong multinational "Stabilization Force", or SFOR-and it is easy to see why Bosnia should not be allowed to become another Cyprus, where the UN has kept the peace now for 25 years.

More than a Cease-Fire

Dayton, it should never be forgotten, was primarily an agreement to stop a war between groups that were bent on each other's destruction. It was the worst ethnic conflict Europe has witnessed in half a century. And as a cease-fire, Dayton has been an unqualified success. Not even NATO's campaign in Kosovo could stir the Bosnian Serbs into insurrection. And at the end of July, soon after the NATO air campaign ended, Sarajevo was stable enough to host a successful 28-nation Stability Pact Summit where the future of the entire region was discussed.

But Dayton was more than a cease-fire, as it also provided for the reformation of the state of Bosnia. Now we have reached a kind of watershed between reconstruction and reform. The reconstruction phase is drawing to a close, with foreign aid budgets being earmarked for Kosovo. The question is, can the international community begin to adopt a lower profile as the reform phase looms larger. The history so far has been that the high representative has increasingly had to impose the decisions on reforms.

During his two-year term, my predecessor, Carlos Westendorp, imposed over 45 decisions and laws on the country, dealing with everything from the design of banknotes to the establishment of the courts. He was also forced to remove 16 high-ranking officials from their positions, including the president of the ethnic Serb component, Republika Srpska, for obstructing the implementation of the peace.

Imposition has always been used as a final resort, when every avenue of negotiation has been exhausted. But interestingly, despite the sound and the fury that always preceded these impositions, each and every one of the high representative's decisions has been accepted without major fuss once it has been taken.

This is because, at heart, the leaders of the three ethnic groups – the Bosniacs, the Croats and the Serbs – know what needs to be done to secure a future for their country. But our presence here has inadvertently absolved them of their responsibilities as democratically elected leaders. We enable the local politicians to fight their tribalistic battles, and then to place the blame for potentially unpopular compromises squarely on the shoulders of foreigners. I call this the "dependency syndrome".

Take the case of something as innocuous as car plates. At the end of the war, these were location-specific, and the plates for residents of the Serb side were written in Cyrillic. The

system was one of the more obvious discouragements to freedom of movement about the country, as those with Cyrillic plates would be reluctant to stray into the Bosniac-Croat side, and vice-versa for people with Roman plates. So in February 1998, we imposed a new, common and anonymous license-plate system.

The complaints were as shrill as they were predictable, particularly from some Bosnian Serb politicians, who chose to interpret the new plates as an assault on their culture and language. Yet the queues for the new plates were longer in Banja Luka, the Bosnian Serb capital, than anywhere else. Today, nobody ever complains.

Our new approach is “ownership”. This implies local ownership not just of assets, but of the problems inherited from communism and the war. Indeed, it implies the entire process of Dayton implementation, the very future of Bosnia-Herzegovina itself.

Acknowledgment of such ownership will require a tremendous leap of faith from Bosnia’s political leaders, who were all in power during the war, and whose ways of thinking are still blurred by outdated ideologies.

This summer’s hot issue, local corruption, is an obvious example. An article in the New York Times in August appeared to claim that as much as a billion dollars of Bosnian taxpayers’ money has been misappropriated by corrupt local and municipal authorities. Alija Izetbegovic, a member of Bosnia’s three-man presidency, and the leader of the Muslim Bosniacs, was furious. The article used two Bosniac-controlled local authorities as examples. Mr. Izetbegovic demanded evidence, and then retractions. Prime Minister Edhem Bicakcic, another Bosniac, was reported by the local press to be considering suing the New York Times, which did issue a high-profile correction as the amount in question appeared to be exaggerated in the article.

But corruption is nonetheless a very serious problem that goes to the core of Bosnian society. And instead of pledging to tackle it with renewed vigor, the meat of Mr. Izetbegovic's response was to appeal, publicly and loudly through the press, for the international community to do something. Investigate ! He said. Compile a report ! Track these criminals down !

Well, no we won't. We can and will assist him and other leaders to the best of our ability, but the primary responsibility for dealing with issues like corruption lies with the elected leaders of Bosnia. We can help them develop necessary instruments, such as modern law enforcement agencies and an independent judiciary. We can remove corrupt officials forever, and document instances of corruption until we are blue in the face, but it will do no good without the political impetus from the top. That is the essence of the concept of ownership.

Mr. Izetbegovic should not be worried by my words. The world has confirmed its commitment to assisting Bosnia-Herzegovina over and over again. Our role is to reform the courts, to strengthen the judiciary and central institutions like the presidency and the council of ministers so that leaders have the tools with which to mend their blighted country. By creating a true civil society, a society that is based on ethnic cohesion, not division, we can enable the people to tackle corruption and other social ills for themselves.

We will also assist with the reform of Bosnia's antiquated economic structures, another root cause of corruption. I will not hesitate to use my powers if need be. Much progress has already been achieved. Much more remains to be done. But the game is up if the elected leadership refuses to act.

The Dayton-enshrined principal of returning refugees to their homes is another case in point. We could rebuild destroyed houses almost forever, but why would people want to return if the local economy was moribund ? The priority for ordinary

Bosnians is jobs and security.

Accountability to Voters

This is evidently not the priority of their leaders, alas. Hopefully, if the politicians continue to demonstrate resistance to change, the electorate can vote them out of office. New voting regulations expected to be in force at municipal elections in April and at the general election next September will greatly increase representatives' accountability to the voters by, for instance, putting candidates' name on ballot sheets rather than, as before, simply using party lists. In future, political candidates will have to sell their policies to the voters, just as they do in other democracies.

The citizens of Bosnia are in fact in the middle of a crash course in democratic responsibility. The encouragement of an independent and pluralistic media, and of new legislation ensuring freedom of information, is another important element of this process. An electorate that is better informed is an electorate that is better able to choose.

The international community's espousal of the new concept of ownership should serve as a wake-up call both to the Bosnian electorate and to its leaders. Who will heed the call first? I don't know. Our main goal is eventual withdrawal from a democratic and prosperous region. Any sign of Bosnians, from any quarter, taking responsibility for themselves will be welcomed as evidence that we are at last firmly on that road.

Mr. Petritsch is the international community's high representative for Bosnia.